



Motivating frontline employees: Role of job characteristics in work and life satisfaction



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ABSTRACT

This study examined the intrinsic motivation for hospitality jobs and the effects of job characteristics on job satisfaction, job stress, and life satisfaction. Data were obtained from the survey responses of 401 frontline employees working at six full-service, upscale hotels in China. Results indicated that autonomy, task identity, and task significance reduced job stress, feedback increased job satisfaction, and task significance enhanced life satisfaction. Surprisingly, skill variety was negatively associated with job satisfaction, but positively associated with job stress. The composite Motivating Potential Score was positively associated with job satisfaction, but negatively associated with job stress. One recommendation is for hospitality organizations to analyze their service jobs to improve the intrinsic motivation of their employees.

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1. Introduction

Certain hospitality businesses such as hotels operate 24 h a day, seven days a week (24/7). The nature of such businesses also requires considerable “face time” between service staff and clients. The work environment can be considered stressful because of this demand (O'Neill & Xiao, 2010). Hence, job characteristics may be the key to determining the affective outcomes of employees (Wan & Chan, 2013). Academic studies and (common-sense) observations have indicated that several hospitality-specific job qualities, such as “anti-social” working hours and seasonality, induce dissatisfaction and stress among employees (Dawson, Abbott, & Shoemaker, 2011; Law, Pearce, & Woods, 1995; Tromp & Blomme, 2012).

To increase employee morale and reduce withdrawal attitudes, researchers have suggested redesigning and enriching hospitality jobs (Lin, Wong, & Ho, 2013a). However, practices may be difficult to change because certain aspects of the industry are inherent to the nature of such jobs. For example, although management may have little control over the hours of operation (Arnold & House,

1980; Dawson et al., 2011), human resource managers may be able to reduce the negatives effects by examining the deep-seated job characteristics, the influence of these characteristics on the attitudes and behaviors of hospitality employees, and the extent to which hotel management jobs can motivate individuals intrinsically.

Job characteristics are the motivational dimensions that affect employee experiences of meaningfulness, responsibility, and knowledge relating to work activities (Loher, Noe, Moeller, & Fitzgerald, 1985). The Job Characteristics Model (JCM) proposed by Hackman and Oldham (1976) can be used to examine hospitality jobs. The JCM comprises five core job characteristics/dimensions, namely, skill variety, autonomy, task identity, feedback, and task significance. These dimensions are regarded as specific attributes that describe and measure job characteristics (Boonzaier, Ficker, & Rust, 2001; Rungtusanatham & Anderson, 1996). These dimensions are used to calculate the Motivational Potential Score (MPS), which measures the motivating potential of a job. Kuruüzüm, Anafarta, and Irmak (2008) have indicated that job characteristics are strong predictors of stress among hotel middle-level managers in Turkey. Moreover, a study of 319 frontline employees of five-star hotels in Mumbai suggests a positive relationship between job characteristics and psychological empowerment (Jha & Nair, 2008).

Hospitality research examining the role of JCM dimensions and

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MPS in enriching jobs and motivating employees is limited. Traditionally, hospitality studies have focused on the impact on affective outcomes such as job satisfaction (Cheung & Law, 1998; Kuruüzüm et al., 2008), but have infrequently examined how the dimensions could affect employee well-being (Lin et al., 2013a). Studies on the factors influencing life satisfaction could explain how employees could come to work in a good mood and why employees are not highly engaged in and even quit their jobs (Kim & Jogaratnam, 2010).

Early JCM studies in tourism and hospitality were principally conducted in Western countries, such as the United Kingdom and Australia (Lee-Ross, 1998a, 1998b, 2005; Lee-Ross & Pryce, 2005). By contrast, very few studies on this subject have been carried out in the Eastern regions (Jha & Nair, 2008). Findings from various cultural backgrounds would then extend the existing knowledge and generalizability of JCM (Shirazi, GolestaniNia, MehrganRad, & Naghdali, 2012). In fact, the hospitality industry in China has become a focus of researchers and practitioners worldwide after its rapid development in the last 30 years (Gross & Huang, 2011; Okoroafo, Koh, Liu, & Jin, 2010). Several studies have examined human resource management issues, such as leadership style (Wong & Chan, 2010), career management (Kong, Cheung, & Song, 2011), and creativity/innovation (Chang, Gong, & Shum, 2011; Hon & Leung, 2011) in Chinese hospitality organizations. Unfortunately, very few studies have investigated the perception of Chinese employees on hospitality job characteristics.

This study aims to extend our knowledge on the role of job characteristics in enriching hospitality jobs and improving attitudes toward work and life. Specifically, the investigation explores why and how the five dimensions of JCM may influence job attitudes, the extent to which hospitality jobs contain motivational potential to employees, and how job attitude mediates the effect on life satisfaction. This paper initially reviews the JCM literature and the relevant studies in the hospitality context, and subsequently proposes the potential effects of job characteristics on job satisfaction, job stress, and life satisfaction. The study examines the hypothesized effects, and the paper concludes with implications for hospitality organizations.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Research progress on hospitality job dimensions

Researchers and practitioners recognize the various aspects of hospitality jobs that primarily induce job satisfaction and stress (Chiang, Birtch, & Cai, 2014; Kim, 2008; Kim, Shin, & Umbreit, 2007). Several studies have defined, identified, and explored these features. Law et al. (1995) identified four (negative) features of hospitality jobs, namely, anti-social working hours, insufficient pay, poor management, and requirements for dealing with the public every day. Tepeci and Bartlett (2002) developed a hospitality industry culture profile to describe frontline positions. Øgaard, Marnburg, and Larsen (2008) suggested that hospitality organizational modes could be organic or mechanistic. Dawson et al. (2011) indicated that hospitality industry positions could be characterized by low wages, little job security, long working hours, lack of opportunities for personal development, and seasonality. According to Wan and Chan (2013), hospitality jobs are different from others based on the dimensions of rest time, regular shift work, and irregular working schedule. Ineson, Benke, and László (2013) explained hospitality job conditions in a more general sense by discussing training, skill development, working hours, job variety, and job security. Although previous research has described hospitality jobs, the results lack consensus because most findings and discussion were based on divergent theoretical grounds. This lack

of consensus has induced difficulty in connecting and comparing research findings as well as in fleshing out meaningful and consistent recommendations.

Moreover, several studies have limited their scope to outcome variables within the workplace, and ignored the potential, indirect but important relationships of hospitality job characteristics to life satisfaction as well as job satisfaction and stress (Duncan, Scott, & Baum, 2013; Lin et al., 2013a; Tromp & Blomme, 2012; Yeh, 2013; see Zhao, Qu, & Ghiselli, 2011). Job satisfaction is “an internal state that is expressed by affectively and/or cognitively evaluating an experienced job with some degree of favor or disfavor” (Brief, 1998, p. 86). Job stress refers to the reactions of employees to “work environment characteristics that appear threatening to the individual” and indicates “a poor fit” between individual capabilities and work environment amid excessive job demands (Jamal, 1990, p. 728). Life satisfaction is a construct that measures the overall well-being resulting from an evaluation of life in general (Graves, Ohlott, & Ruderman, 2007; Karatepe & Baddar, 2006). These dimensions are critical attitudes that shape the behaviors of employees. The application of a well-established theoretical model (i.e., Job Characteristics Model) is necessary to illuminate the role of hospitality jobs and their relationship with job satisfaction, job stress, and life satisfaction.

2.2. Job characteristics model

The Job Characteristics Model (Hackman & Oldham, 1976) is a formal theory that illustrates the extent to which the essential attributes of jobs influence employee attitudes and behaviors (Rungtusanatham & Anderson, 1996). The model identifies the five core dimensions of jobs, namely, skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Based on these dimensions, a “composite” score or the motivational potential score (MPS) can be calculated to gauge the extent to which a job motivates employees (Boonzaier et al., 2001; Hinton & Biderman, 1995; Saavedra & Kwun, 2000). The JCM explains intrinsic (workplace) motivation via three critical psychological states (Rungtusanatham & Anderson, 1996).

First, *skill variety*, *task significance*, and *task identity* reflect the experienced meaningfulness of the work (e.g., Behson, Eddy, & Lorenzet, 2000). According to Hackman and Oldham (1976), skill variety refers to the extent to which employees can use various personal and professional skills to perform their jobs. Task significance reflects the degree to which jobs may influence the work of others. Task identity describes the extent to which jobs would comprise the entire (vs. a recognizable piece of the) work. Employees are also more likely to sense higher levels of meaningfulness when they use their personal abilities (Cummings & Bigelow, 1976; Lawler & Hall, 1970). Moreover, their job outcomes may help other colleagues, and their work considered to be more independent (Cerasoli, Nicklin, & Ford, 2014; Futrell, 1977; Pearce, 1983). Consequently, employees will feel a higher level of intrinsic motivation to continue doing their jobs better, be satisfied with their jobs, experience less work stress, and ultimately increase their happiness in life (Karatepe & Tekinkus, 2006; Kim & Jogaratnam, 2010; Vittersø, 2003; Wiesner, Windle, & Freeman, 2005). In light of these effects, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1a. Skill variety positively affects job satisfaction.

H1b. Task significance positively affects job satisfaction.

H1c. Task identity positively affects job satisfaction.

H2a. Skill variety negatively affects job stress.

H2b. Task significance negatively affects job stress.

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